FIRE DEPARTMENT

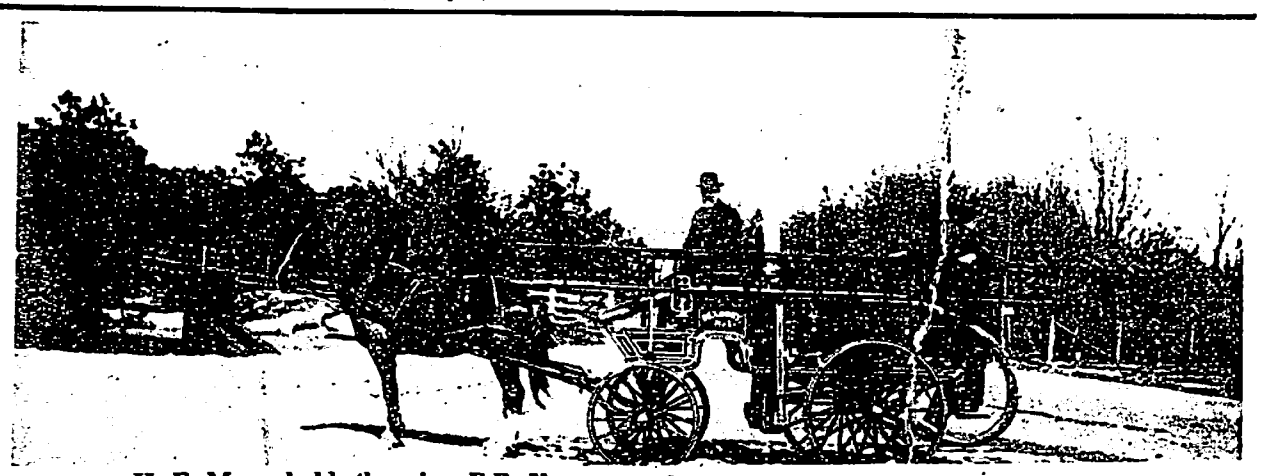
The Duxbury Fire Department

(This is the second of 3 articles on the history of the Duxbury Fire Department)

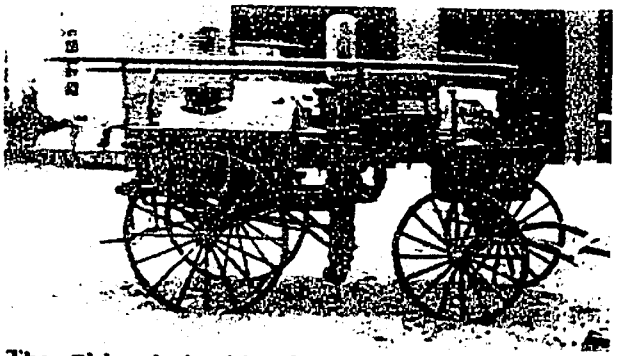
The Evolution of Duxbury's Fire Apparatus

By the Rev. Canon Robert Merry

It could only be compared to an invasion of locusts or even to General Patton's columns of tanks as they fanned out over the island of Sicily in World War II. This is what it felt like all over the coastal areas of Massachusetts, and especially in Duxbury with its attractive beach on summer Sunday afternoons in the twenties. The automobile had just gotten a firm hold on the hearts and minds and passions of Americans and they scrambled for the release from crowded hot cities into the solace of beaches and ponds and parks and open air. People then living on St. George St., Washington St. and Powder Point Ave. can never forget those hot, dusty, noisy fume-filled Sunday afternoons when solid lines of cars rolled relentlessly and ruthlessly past our front doors on the way to park on Long Bridge and bathe in the cool waters of Cape Cod Bay. There was a turn-around at the end of the bridge but the inside beach road was not built until the WPA days in the thirties. Cars would roll across the bridge, turn around at the end and park on the side, often with informal curtains at the windows for dressing. Our growing forests were often used for picnics, going and coming, and Duxbury became, for a time, a carpetland for residents of Brockton, Whitman, Rockland, etc. All with disastrous results for our modest fire equipment. A monument of praise should be erected to those solid citizens who badgered the legislature and state highway department into improving highways through relatively rural areas so the residents of our town could be free from this scourge.



H. E. Merry holds the reins. F.B. Knapp stands on the platform. Bess is in the shaft.



The old handtub with a fresh coat of paint standing in front of Duxbury's new fire station.

Picnics and small campfires and cigarette butts alerted our forest fire department with its new station (1917) at North Duxbury (now closed) who did a yeoman job in their area. Inevitably, our wooden Long Bridge would be affected and I remember well the frantic calls and the frenzied response as Edwin Baker and I raced to douse a fire in the bridge planking. We had a new Brockway fire engine (1923) and I recall rushing down to #1 Engine House, ringing the bell and leaping onto the front seat with Ed at the wheel and breaking our way down the Long Bridge, siren screaming and planks roaring to the scene. Can you picture driving 35 miles an hour on the bridge between a row of parked cars on the right and oncoming traffic on the left? I had nightmares over it.

#1 Fire Station was near the corner of Washington St. and Blue Fish River Bridge, just below our family's house. As a child I thought it was put there for my Father's convenience, as he had become chief of the department before I was born. Our present fire chief, Howard Blanchard, says it was moved from its original location near the present library in 1908 because of the proximity of the Briggs' livery stables and the shopping center that had sprung up on both sides of the street from the river to the Cable Office. Tony Lucas's Barbershop and Grueby's Plumbing and Sales Shop were on the left side and a large First National grocery store across from the Cable Office. Chief Blanchard believes it was the handy source of horsepower to pull the fire engine and voluntary manpower to man the tub that dictated the move. Later when Briggs' stable left, the engine was fitted with large leather straps for men to pull the wagon. There was a similar fire station at #2, with a "handtub" wagon for fire protection in that region.

The first records of the purchase of fire equipment for Duxbury were those of these 2 "handtubs" in 1834 and 1835, one each for No. 1 and No. 2. "Handtubs" is a modest title for a formidable piece of fire apparatus (see photo). It consisted of what was essentially an oversized barrel on wheels, which had an intake opening on one end, a swivel pump in the middle with parallel bars along the sides to allow as many as 4 men on each side to pump and a spigot with a hose attached ending in a nozzle on the other end. These "handtubs" became more and more sophisticated as time went on, with larger and more efficient suction hoses replacing the "water intake" on the top and longer hoses and sharper nozzles that could throw a column of water over 100 feet into the air. Competition between fire companies for the highest stream were held regularly at community celebrations on the 4th of July and at country fairs. This was a crowning feature of Brockton Fair till recently, and Marshfield Fair this Aug. 30 is recalling the old days with a "Statewide Firemen's Muster" as it was called.

In the early days with no community water supply fire protection was difficult at best. Under the optimum conditions after the alarm was sounded by the ringing of the fire bell (few phones were in use) a horse was hitched to the handtub and driven to the scene where if possible water in the cistern in the basement (gathered from rain water on the roof) and the attic tank (pumped from the well in the backyard by a windmill) were brought into play by the bucket brigade now using the handtub full force. Of course once the local water was exhausted there was not much that could be done.

Few records were kept of Duxbury's organized efforts at fire protection until 1895 when Town Meeting authorized the purchase of 12 fire extinguishers. These were to be distributed to various regions of the town called "Fire Wards". The **Duxbury Clipper** in its 25th Anniversary issue of May 8, 1975, records familiar Duxbury names among those placed in charge. Names like Soule, Chandler, Bailey, Alden, Weston, Loring, Peterson and Briggs, among many others, and about this time Eden Soule was named head of the department and coordinator of efforts.

It was on Aug. 23, 1900, that the town established the "Board of Fire Engineers" with Frederick B. Knapp, a professor from Harvard who had come to Duxbury to found Powder Point Boys' School, as chief engineer. Knapp was an imaginative, energetic and vocal exponent of effective fire protection. I remember him well with his square bushy beard, his high pitched voice and his twinkling eyes. He was a perfect image of William James, the famous Harvard philosopher and possessed the same clarity of vision and impractical idealism of the professor. That he was also amply endowed with sound judgment is evidenced by the fact that he lost no time in securing the assistance of a young man just mustered out of the army after the Spanish American War, by the name of Hortence E. Merry, my father, who had just the practical common sense, political savvy and dedicated drive he needed. These 2 men more than any others would be responsible for the building of the future modern Duxbury Fire Department, but that is our next story.

For now it may be useful to take a general look at the history of fire fighting and then bring it back to Duxbury's experience. The record of the curbing and controlling of the destructive power of fire has always been a high priority in the activities of the human race since its discovery in Paleolithic times (or earlier?). One way that was found was to keep it confined in non-combustible materials and out of range of anything that would burn. Hence stone and brick fireplaces and furnaces etc. This same principle was applied in 64 BC after Rome burned (while Nero fiddled) in London in 1666 after London burned and in 1871 after Chicago burned. (For the record it should be said that recent revelations have exonerated Mrs. O'Leary's cow in this affair.) But fire remained a great scourge and it was a constant dread for everyone. In colonial times and after out in rural areas there just was no fire protection except what the owners could afford in the way of buckets and shovels and hand pumps. The trick was to get there while the fire was small and manageable. Often this was impossible. In a thunderstorm with a stroke of lightning a life-time's accumulation in property investment could vanish in minutes. In the villages and towns, however, there was a different picture.

assisted one another in a community effort to keep at bay a community foe. First in addition to wells on private property water mains were dug to form a network of protection throughout the town. The original water mains were made of wood, solid pine planking sunk only 2 or 3 feet below the surface of the ground. If a house caught fire shovels would uncover the main and axes would cut a hole through the planking, and the water would gush out to form a pool reserve for the bucket brigade, ready to fill the "handtub" to be worked by the volunteer neighborhood crew. A nearby tree would be cut as soon as enough water was obtained, sharpened on the butt end and shoved in to plug the hole in the planking. Hence the term "fire-plug" we still use today. This shaped tree trunk remained to let all and sundry know where instant water was available. (I was intrigued to discover that the department paid rent of $2,595 in 1925 to the Water Department and $78,882 in 1979.)

Duxbury records show that in 1905 Elisha Peterson was given charge of a fire wagon that was kept loaded with extinguishers, chemicals and a barrel of water, pails and shovels and axes. A stipulation was that it be "no more than one horse can pull." And with the installation of town water in 1914, a brand new dimension of fire fighting began. Now water pressure from Captain's Hill reservior was sufficient to handle all except total conflagrations. Standing below a house on fire as I did once with Eben Briggs and holding that nozzle while it brought the beast to its knees was a rough experience, and many is the time I've watched our firefighters in operation and realized they really do earn their keep.

It was not until about 1919 that autos were brought into use in Duxbury. The first was at No. 2 Engine House which also boasted a "hose cart" trailer. It was soon felt that town water pressure was not sufficient for a major conflagration so a pumper was bought and brought into service. Engine House No. 1 boasted of a little model "T" Ford with two 50-gallon tanks and 300 feet of hose, pressure supplied by chemically obtained gas. In 1923 the little Model T was demoted to forest fire duty and a Brockway 1½ ton truck with many yards of hose was bought. I recall my father's pride and pleasure as he drove this in the July 4 parades.

In 1929 a more elaborate fire apparatus was bought, stationed at No. 2 Fire House. A new building was constructed to house it and Richard Whitney was retained as our first full-time professional firefighter. About this time in a letter to the selectmen the chief of the department said this had been the worst year for fires in the life of the town, 7 forest fires being set in a single day largely from locomotives of the many trains that came through.

It was also about this time (the early 30's) that the then "Rural Society" worked with the Department using WPA funding to cut fire-breaks through our growing forests and dig "fire-holes" for reserve forest fire protection. We see that the Town Meeting appropriated $3,000 for a fleet of small fire auto wagons to drive through these trails on call.

A great step forward was taken in 1946 when a pumper was purchased for $10,350 and stationed at No. 2 Engine House. Records also show the changing role of fire-fighting in the purchase of an ambulance and of a rescue boat with powerful outboard motor, brought into use only last Sunday when 2 teenage girls fell off Long Bridge and were being carried by the swift currents and whirlpools up Duck Hill River. The system also includes a regional radio network set up in 1945, with instant communications in emergency to several bordering towns. All fire information is simultaneously relayed to all these towns so all will know who is doing what and who needs help, where and how much.

In 1976 a hook and ladder truck was bought for $72,878, the most modern and efficient fire and rescue apparatus on the market today. It can be lifted hydraulically by a single man, and raised over a burning field or a stream or pond to rescue a survivor of a burning building; it has a built-in hose-pipe that throws water directly on the blaze at the rate of 1250 gallons a minute. This is one reason why the state fire authorities have given Duxbury a "state of the art" citation.

It is a long and interesting history, and we are today abreast of any and all modern methods of fire control, human resuscitation, first-aid and general para-medical training, quite a distance from the bucket brigade of a century or so ago. Today we boast of 13 different pieces of fire and rescue apparatus, all ready to serve on a moments notice.